MITZ

a story by Brooks Kohler

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This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are a coincidence.

Dedicated to M

Chapter 1

The sunset made everything look warm, even Mitzy, the attractive thirty-four-year-old from up the street who always seemed so cool. Alex was on the front porch, relaxed in a chair, in nothing more than a t-shirt and knee-cut khakis when she came walking up the steps wearing a pink tank top, blue striped shorts, and smooth finish jump shoes, options that accentuated her perfect summer tan.

It was a humid day, the type of summer day that Rural America, and grand, southern authors had made famous. Everything was sticky. The air smelled sweet, like a fresh box of cereal. Pecker flies, tiny, menacing flies that swarmed dog genitalia circled over yards in dedicated, annoying clumps. A constant hum of air conditioners and lawnmowers could be heard. Breathing was difficult, and the only people outside were those who had to be or were otherwise into some sick,

twisted masochistic ritual of intense sweating.

"You up for a walk?" asked Mitzy.

"Let it cool down first," Alex replied.

Mitzy grinned and sighed. She looked good when she did those things. Her tender years had been good to her. She was slim, petite, and athletic. She jogged every morning and walked every evening, which was more than could be said for their neighbors.

Small-town American life is predictable life. It is repetitious. What competitive spirit one brings into the world is left behind in adolescence. Alex was aware of this, and so too was Mitzy. Neither claimed Tennessee a Godsend state, nor did they cherish books about nostalgia. All either of them wanted was a simple place to get on with living, dying, or both, and the town of Stugot offered that.

"I'm going to get some water," said Mitzy.

"Help yourself," replied Alex.

Mitzy entered the home and Alex smiled. He liked it when she did those things, those things she simply did. They registered as a kind of "like" in his

head, a way of her telling him he was not just another divorcee in his early fifties with graying hair who enjoyed sitting on his porch, but he was somebody that mattered, somebody worth spending time with, and somebody she trusted.

Alex was enjoying the thought when Mitzy returned. She stepped out onto the porch with vibrance, a glass of water, and a moist towel that she handed to Alex. He gladly accepted the towel and started to dab it against his dewy brow.

"Bingogodda this Friday?" she asked.

"Sounds like a plan," said Alex.

"There's some festival going on, I think."

"Good."

"Are you just saying that?"

Alex came to and focused on her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Long day."

Alex handed the towel back to Mitzy, and she walked to a chair where she took a passive seat.

"Tell me about it," she said.

It was the thing he liked most about her. Besides her looks and youthful love of life, two

attributes he admired, what he enjoyed most about Mitzy was her desire to truly know what he was feeling, and with this comfort and her ease, he began to share his day with her.

Alex talked for hours. He talked so long that the western horizon began to burn red and the shadows began to stretch east. He told her about how his stocks were down, how his coffee maker had a leak, and he had to purchase a new one. He shared with her that the house was making a strange sound, and he was certain it was caused by bad plumbing. The sound, he described, would begin with a knock that would lead to a bang and crescendo to a gurgle. He wanted to call a plumber, but dreaded the answer. He talked about the news, the weather, and finally slipped something in about Nora. He had to talk about Nora, and Mitzy knew he did. She had been waiting for him to lay in with some story about her, some memory he had tucked away that needed recalling. He told her about a trip they had taken to Washington to see a friend she had who was sick with cancer. He told her the story

and then settled into silence. He talked about her a lot, especially at night, which brought on the somber tone.

He was sitting there, staring off into space. Mitzy was lost in his story, and totally forgetful of the time, which, while he had talked, had slipped from hazy, lazy evening to sleepy, weepy night.

“You up for that walk now?” she asked.

Alex let go and grinned.

“Sure thing,” he replied. “Let me get my shoes.”

Chapter 2

It was much cooler when Alex and Mitzy hit the pavement for their evening walk, but there was still a thick, humid blanket draped over the town which made walking like wading through an unseen fog. Mitzy had grabbed a glass of ice water from the house, and the two friends shared it as they ventured out.

The goal was to complete a circle through what the locals called the “Fruit Section,” on account that before being converted into a residential district, it had been an orchard, and the streets had since been given names like Orange, Cherry, Apple, and Plum.

They started out on Morgan Street, the street that both Alex and Mitzy lived on, a street known for its collegiate style homes, and walked west until they arrived at West Spring where they made a right and followed the street down to the

intersection of South Green. At South Green, they proceeded west to Orange, and from Orange to Orchard, from Orchard to Cherry, and from Cherry to West Spring where they followed it south until they arrived once again at Morgan.

This was their typical route, and each had a favorite section. Mitzy enjoyed the houses along Orchard and Cherry, and Alex was fond of the homes on Orange. The houses on Orchard reminded Mitzy of the suburb she left in Peoria, where ranch-style homes were well-kept and the lawns were brightly lit, and to Alex, the winding, curving route of Orange, with houses that looked as though they could be in Long Beach with low profiles but distinguished in design, appealed to his sensibility for clean, artistic discretion. He especially liked the low, canopy trees and how many of the trees looked exotic and foreign to the landscape of Rural America.

“They planned that, you know?” he would say, as they passed through. “We got the trees in our yards that just grow up, but these people wanted

these trees. Trees like that," he would laugh, "go to good homes."

Maybe he was right. Maybe he was wrong. Mitzy did not care. She simply enjoyed the walk and being with Alex. He was older, and perhaps more set in his ways than a thirty-six-year-old bachelor would have been, but Alex was always there for her when she needed him, and he had life experiences that made him a commodity in a town where dreams were limited.

He had spent the early part of the 1990s as a manager for a grunge rock band, traveling across the northwest and meeting all sorts of spirits that were loose and free in those times.

"Some of my best friends are criminals," he would remark, joking on a riddle and making a reference to the radicals that were part of his life in those days, but then, just as soon as he would let that go, he would move on to Nora, who he said, "broke his heart, and that's why I'm here and not in Denver."

When he would speak of Nora and slip into

talk of Denver, he would do so as if on cue.

It usually happened on the last leg of their nightly walk, when they were beginning to close in on Morgan Street and its homes with large, front porches ordained in ceramic pots filled with luscious, green plants made visible at night by yellow light through curtained windows. These images brought out something in Alex that made him almost godlike to Mitzy. His eyes seemed to glow, just staring at the homes as if there was some special code that existed in the pattern of ups and downs.

He was one of the lucky ones in life who had been able to do what he wanted because he was smart enough to do what he could, and this meant that Alex's mind was always thinking about the next big thing, which in the late 1990s was online music.

He had managed to get in on the ground floor, when the Internet was not closely monitored, and the laws were so sketchy nobody understood how to legislate the cyber realm. With his knowledge of bands and his friends with creative

interests, he helped to launch several music sites, none of which still remained in operation because none of them was legal, but what he did manage to do was set a precedent and help others do the same, and by the time he was forty-six, Alex was sitting on cherished stock that was eleven years old and worth more than four times what it had been worth when he first invested.

Whether he were well off or not would depend upon how one interpreted success. Two years before moving to Stugot, he had retired from the daily grind, and if the American Dream was defined as sitting on a porch with nothing to do all day except sip tea, wine, or beer and think about an attractive girl like Mitzy stopping by, then, yes, Alex was an example to strive for, but that is not how he viewed himself.

“No smarts here,” he would say, humbly. “People say I am, but those who know me, know I’m lucky. Nora knew I was lucky. She never guessed twice on it.”

Mitzy would grin whenever he would excuse

himself, but deep down inside she was mystified by his life and what Nora must have meant to this interesting man she had befriended and had grown very fond of. She would wink at Alex's recollections and take his mind off the past, but sooner or later she knew they would return to the pond of memories, and Alex knew she would hook his thoughts and reel them in. She had this gentle way about her, Mitzy did, that made even the most rigid story seem frivolous. Alex could walk for hours with this precious person from the north, taking each step on the gaze of her warm smile, her charm, her wit and way, knowing that by doing so he was gaining more than a step.

"So Bingogodda this weekend?" asked Mitzy.

They had walked until they arrived at the pathway leading to her home.

Alex breathed in deep. He looked around at the houses. They were all so neatly lit up, and nearby the sad, soft sound of jazz could be heard. He looked around, searching for the sacred melody.

“Coltrane,” he said, waving his finger about, as though he were a beatnik. “Who the hell listens to Coltrane around here?”

“Mrs. Sanders,” said Mitzy. “She listens to all kinds of stuff.”

Alex nodded and rocked on his heels. He did a spin, ending with a subtle bow, and Mitzy chuckled.

“Yeah, I bet she does,” he continued, slow and drawn. “I bet she does.”

Their eyes met. Alex had a bashful look on his face that was almost childlike.

“I’m still trying to figure you out,” said Mitzy.

“So are the police,” he joked.

“Maybe,” she said, soft and whispering.

She leaned in close and rising on her tippy toes, she got close enough to give him a kiss, close enough he could smell her lips which were bathed in a sweet honey gloss.

“I want to kiss you,” she said. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time now.”

“Then why don’t you, so you can avoid

getting a cramp in your toes?"

"Because I can't," she said, relaxing. "We're too good of friends."

"Can't friends be lovers?" asked Alex.

Mitzy's mood changed. It was strange that it did, and Alex sensed it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're right."

"A lot of men would be mad. My exhusband would be furious," she concluded, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I'm not him," said Alex, bringing her back to him. "I'm not like any man you've met, Mitzy."

Her eyes grew wide with how he said it. In her mind she was thinking, "Damn! This man is confident." He was, and she knew it, and all she could do was feel Alex chip a little more away from the protective layer she had built around her heart.

"So Bingogodda this Friday?" she asked again, one more time before calling it a night.

"Bingogodda," affirmed Alex, with a grin.

"Good, then we will have some fun and some wine." She opened her arms, pulled him in with a

smile and wrapping him tightly, she hugged him, until she felt her heart give way. “Good night, Alex,” she said, softly.

“Good night, Mitzy.”

She let him go and started to walk away toward the house, but before getting too far, she turned abruptly and hurried back to him. Taking him by surprise, she wrapped her arms around him one more time.

“I’m happy to have you in my life,” she said.

“Me too,” replied Alex. “Me too.”

Chapter 3

The weekend arrived, and it must have been an odd sight for the tourists to see a jet black, high polished seventies cruiser van, complete with big, bold fender flares and dark tint, bubble windows, pulling into the parking lot of one of Rural America's finest wineries, but when Alex wanted to, he could put on a show.

For the outing to Bingogodda he wore his usual, khaki shorts and loafers, but his shirt was a red Hawaiian, and on his head was something that looked like a cross between a sombrero and a cowboy hat.

"Take that off," said Mitzy, reaching for it.

"No," replied Alex, in a low, gruff voice.

They were standing outside the van. In the west, the sun was going down, but the humidity and shadows still lingered. Muffled music from a live band could be heard, echoing, and people were

standing around, smoking cigarettes and sipping wine.

Alex was second guessing his choice of clothing. In the stagnant heat, he was beginning to ripen. He sniffed his armpits and fanned himself by pinching the fabric of his shirt and working it like a pump.

“You’re really going to wear that thing?” asked Mitzy, nodding to the hat.

“I am.”

Mitzy sighed and started to walk.

“Why do I put up with you, Alex?”

“’Cause I’m not boring, Mitz,” he said, with a smirk. “All these people are more boring than me. Just look at them. They reek of boring.”

“You reek of Old Spice and lemon.”

“That be the Bloody Bull, my dear.”

“More like the Bloody Bullshit,” replied Mitzy.

Alex chuckled. He leaned in and whispered, “People are staring.”

“They’re staring at you,” she replied, giving

him a playful slap. “You look like you just walked off the set of Magnum P.I.”

“Uh, huh,” he said. “Let’s mingle.”

The atmosphere at Bingogodda was always inviting. This was why Mitzy liked it. It made her feel connected to her father, a man who enjoyed traveling and enjoying the fine things life had to offer. The visitors to Bingogodda were the same outgoing, energetic types from Chicago, New York, and faraway places that seemed a million miles from Rural America.

The winery itself was a large, brown, earth-style dwelling that reminded one of a ski resort lodge, and built around it were small cabins that could be rented for the pleasure of touring the backdrop of hazy, rolling hills. In the center of all this was an amphitheater where musicians could perform their soothing tunes through towering speakers, and as Alex and Mitzy approached the gathered crowd, the music became more clear and less muffled.

Immediately men began to notice Mitzy, and

Alex felt a surge latch hold of him. As much as he hated to admit it, he was aware that there was an elitism to beauty, and someone as attractive and charming as Mitzy was an asset in a crowd accustomed to having the best, and as they eased through, Mitzy was aware but was not offended. She simply smiled and acted as though it was a normal night out, and by all accounts, it was. The two friends had been making the rounds nearly every weekend since the start of summer so there was no reason to assume this night would be any different, especially when Alex spied Sully Higgins, a local business man who fancied himself a southern gentleman, despite living most of his youth in the Yankee north.

Sully was a winner, the kind of man that would have done well in a world made of plastic. He always wore blue khakis and sported a golf shirt that looked fresh out of the caddy store. His clothing was a sketch pad of embroidered endorsements for whatever was new and hot in the pro-golfing world, and even when he walked, he

did so as though he had practiced his swagger walking from green to green. A mid-forties bachelor, Sully had tried on several occasions to get Mitzy to do something with him, which was polite code for dinner and sex, and every time he asked her the question, he did so in the same fainthearted way in which people who think they have money ask a serious question while socializing. He would walk up, pretend to care, make small talk with Alex to test the waters, and with a raised, inquisitive eyebrow, he would toss out, “So how you been?”

It was always a complete shut off. Alex knew Sully was just trying to weasel his way into Mitzy, and she knew it too. She would always reply with recuse and walk on, but this night, Sully was very confident. He approached with a special someone at his side, a very attractive female who was new and appearing to hug his desperate hip.

“Holy shit,” said Alex. “Let’s head to the bar.”

Making haste, the two were cornered.

“And how long you been here?” asked Sully, proud and smug. He was sipping a glass of white

wine and pinching his lips to savor the flavor.

"We just arrived," replied Alex. "We were on our way to the bar."

"And, how are you, Mitzy?" he asked, flashing a bright, bold smile.

"I'm fine, Sully."

"This is my friend, Claire Bridges, in case you were wondering."

She had a young face but was close to Sully's age. Mitzy acted smug in her response.

"Actually, I wasn't, but thanks for letting me know."

"Claire is from St. Louis," continued Sully. "She works with a digest doing a story on wineries."

Mitzy turned away and chuckled into a cough. Alex grinned, but Sully was unamused.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No," replied Alex. "She's just got a bug or something in her throat. It started on the way in."

"Well, if you weren't such a cheap bastard, you'd have the vents cleaned in that old carpetbagger you drive. What year is that? An

eight-two? Three? Five?"

"It's a seventy-six," snapped Alex.

"Ah, yeah, you're into old things, aren't you?" replied Sully, with a smirk.

Alex returned a concentrated stare, the kind of stare he was known for in his youth when things were about to get nasty.

"I recommend you try something sweet to cure that, Mitzy," continued Sully. "A chambourcin should do the trick."

Mitzy burst into laughter and doubled over. She stumbled a bit and eased away. Alex watched her move into a weaving pattern.

"I really need to go to her," he said.

Forgetting Sully and his darling date, Alex rushed to Mitzy.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"His...his...his..." she gasped. "His fly is unzipped."

"Really?" Alex raised up and looked. Curious, he found she was right. Sully, like a fool, was completely unaware that the tip of his fat, pink

prick was poking out. “Jesus!” exclaimed Alex. “It’s like a beacon against that blue.” He turned to Mitzy, who was still trying to deal with it. She was hunched over, fighting for composure. “I wonder,” continued Alex, in a very concerned tone, “if the head is just kind of holding itself there.”

“Gross,” commented Mitzy. “TMI, TMI.”

She gave the signal to stop.

“It’s just a thought,” said Alex.

Mitzy recovered and raised up. She wiped joyful tears from her eyes.

“Someone needs to tell him,” she said.

“I’m sure they will after they get their kicks.”

Alex began to gently message her back. Mitzy continued to laugh, but as he rubbed, she moved away from what was left of the moment and composed. Straightening, she prepared herself for prepping by running the tips of her fingers through her hair and sliding them behind her ears. Without a word, she turned and looked toward the crowd.

“Maybe the chambourcin would be nice,” said Mitzy.

With a calm that took hold, she reached for his hand. She looked into his tired, gentle, sun-haggard eyes and smiled. Then, with a finger to finger tug, she led him in.

Chapter 4

Alex knew he had fallen in love with Mitzy, and he knew that she cared for him too, but just how much was a mystery. He was old enough to know the signs of love but also wise enough to know they could be misread. As he grew older, it had become less important for him to say the word “love” and more important for him to express it in ways that a “word” could not. He also knew that time was the greatest gift one could share with another. If he had learned anything from Nora, it was that life is made up of moments shared. So when they returned home from the winery, and Mitzy begged for an evening walk, he did not hesitate to agree, but first he had to prime the ole twolegged engine.

“What are you doing?” asked Mitzy, resting against Alex’s kitchen table.

“Hell, if I know.”

Alex was standing over the counter, near the sink, slicing fruit with a paring knife, and adding the slices and chunks to an old metal thermos that looked as if it had been salvaged from a dump. Mitzy was fanning herself, enjoying the coolness of the home, a convenience to the damp air outside.

“Is that clean?” she asked.

“It’s was my grandfather’s,” boasted Alex. “He worked for the railroad. I was told it was used on the railroad to hold ice water, but who the hell knows. Why don’t you put on something we can groove to. There’s some Don Wilkerson in the jukebox.”

Mitzy heeded the suggestion and scooted away from the table. She sauntered out of the kitchen and into the brightly lit living room, a place decorated in plush, red furniture, dark woods, and walls that were milk white. Alex enjoyed the cabin, condo look. The interior of his house had the feel of money mixed with woody European craftsmanship, the kind of dressing that an old pub owner would have been proud to see. Everything

was kept neatly in its own place. The flat panel television mounted to the relative wall was serviced by a single remote that rested on an executive plate, that in turn rested on an earth-burned coffee table that had legs that snuggled into a deep shag rug that mimicked a type of fur. On the coffee table there were magazines about investing and adventure, and a scan of the nearby bookshelves would have revealed more of the same in the way of hardbacks and soft bounds.

The floor was original mahogany, sanded down to a dull finish and unless a rug covered the planks, it spread out through the entire house. This meant everything always felt the same, always connected, always balanced and even. From the bedroom to the kitchen, the floor never changed, and when it did, it was temporary. A rug could be replaced easily, and Alex had a simple philosophy about floors; as long as you could walk on them in your shoes, you were doing something right. A lot of time was wasted in taking off shoes to enter homes, and Alex had grown to respect time.

Once he had put in just the right amount of whatever, he stepped away from the counter and walked over to a small liquor cabinet that, like the thermos, looked as though it had been salvaged from a past of misspent recreation.

With a skeptical eye, Mitzy returned and watched him gain a large bottle of vodka.

“No way, Alex,” she said, raising her voice. “You’re not adding that.”

“It’s called yucca, my dear, but I think the local heathens refer to it as Swamp Juice. We made it in my youth to get bent.”

“Yeah, and look at you now. All crooked. I’m not drinking that.”

“Then you don’t have to. This congress believes in choice.”

Alex grinned and poured the vodka into the thermos. The fruit in the bottom floated to the top and he leaned over, sniffing.

“Ah, now that brings back memories,” he said, with a wink.

“Does it bring back brain cells?” asked Mitzy,

stepping forward and peeking into the thermos. She squinted and jerked. “Christ, Alex! That smells awful.”

Alex continued to grin. He walked back to the liquor cabinet, waving his finger in the air, and he returned with a bottle of Ever Clear, a white concoction that the brave consume when they are desperate.

“You know,” he said, unscrewing the lid, “you can’t get this solid proof in California. Too damn strong for those libs.”

“And there’s a reason for that. It’s like moonshine. Come on, Alex. It’ll give a person a heart attack.”

“Well, I’m not a doctor, and you may be right, but it will most definitely give a person a buzz, which is not a bad thing when you think of it.”

“You’ll have more than a buzz,” she said. “You’ll be lucky to crawl to bed.”

Mitzy looked at him. Her eyes were honest and sincere. Alex peered into the thermos and swirled it a bit. The chunks of fruit blended

together with the alcohol, forming a kind of juice slurry. A silence fell on them. She could sense him change. His tensity relaxed. His humor faded slightly. Something was happening in his wonderful, graying mind, and Mitzy was trying to figure it out. She shifted against the counter, placing her back to it so she could think off into the kitchen.

"Nineteen seems like yesterday," he said. Mitzy looked at him. "I always thought I would outgrow it, but I can't. No matter how far away I get from it, it still seems close."

He whispered the words as though he was going to cry. Mitzy leaned over and placed her head on his shoulder.

"It's the wine," she said, comforting.

There was only a moment and then Alex came to.

"You're right!" he said, in a eureka tone. "I'll put this away and make us a Turbo."

Alex started to rush across the room, but Mitzy took him by the hand. She stopped him and

tugged him back. “Let’s just walk,” she said.

Chapter 5

For their walk, Alex brought along a small radio with hours of stored jazz. He turned on the box, and the sweet, soothing sounds of something found online came out of the tiny speaker. Mitzy started to skip ahead in a playful way, and Alex bobbed his head in a cool, jazzy style. Luckily, a breeze had arrived to stir the stale air, and the lingering heat of the day had become less stifling. Around them, wisps of air caused leaves to sizzle, and a comfortable feeling, akin to ad hoc bliss, settled over the town.

"Should've of made that Turbo," said Alex.

"You don't need that," replied Mitzy, slowing down and taking him by the arm. "You got me."

She said it in a cute girl way, dorky and flirty. She winked and once again bolted ahead. Alex continued to bop along while she did spins in the street. Watching her, his mind went back to a

memory of a scene that was similar, except there was snow and ice, and nothing but silhouettes and moonlight. For a moment he could see Nora, and for a moment he was out of Stugot, and back in Denver, back at the old farm pond that would freeze over, back in the apartment economically priced for those without any money or any big plans. Mitzy was twirling, laughing, and giggling in the pleasantness. She caught a glimpse of Alex's face and her excitement eased.

"You there?"

"Go ahead. I'm fine."

Mitzy dropped her head and allowed her arms to go limp. She sighed and waited for him to come close enough so she could look him in the eye. When he did, he stopped, and Mitzy raised her head.

"You know I can't be her?" she said.

"I never said you could."

"It's just that I've already had that."

"I know, and you don't have that with me."

"But you still go there."

"And I can't really help that," he said in a reminding tone. Mitzy put her head down. Alex lifted it with his finger. "Hey," he continued, softly. "What's this? We got a great night for walking. Not too hot, no clouds in the sky, and somewhere in my colorful past I pilfered some of the best jazz I've ever heard." He held up the radio as proof. A whirling horn was spinning out. Mitzy nodded and grinned. She stepped close to Alex and put her arms around him. Her petite frame felt good against him and something else, down below, tucked and hidden, enjoyed it too.

"Why, you pervy old man."

"You should be proud. That's all natural."

Alex gave a coy wink, the kind of action that ushers a response, and it did. Mitzy tapped him on the chest and sprang away from him. She was once again spinning and dancing and did this for several minutes before finally hurrying back to his side and taking him firmly by the arm.

"I want to walk Plum," she said.

"Then we shall," replied Alex.

"It's shorter," she said, "but it's different."

"It is," added Alex.

Plum Street was a midpoint between South Green and Orchard and connected Orange to Cherry, cutting walking time in half. Starting at Orange, a person entered a grove of evergreens that covered only a few acres before fading out and opening up to houses which consisted of ranch and suburban, single stories. At night, a hodgepodge of green and orange streetlights lit the way through the center of the section, the green lights being the old style yard lights the city had not yet replaced with the more illuminating orange. This gave the evergreens a feeling of foreboding as the light spectrums beamed and cast shadows long and narrow, the old mixing with the new in some strange sense of progress.

From Orange, they arrived at Plum, and Alex stopped.

"At one time this was woods, then farms, then this," he said. "I hope it never changes."

Mitzy looked at him. He had an enchantment

in his eyes.

"You're deep," she said, "deeper than me."

"I've got years," he said, kindly, "and places like this, places you can walk, are vanishing."

It was a sad thought, and Mitzy sucked it up as just one of the many sad things Alex could interject for no reason other than he could. She was trying to dampen the thought when the music on the radio changed to a Latin groove.

"Damn," said Alex, confused but pleased. "I thought I lost this."

"Guess not," said Mitzy, strolling on.

She entered the shadowed Plum, and Alex followed, changing his stride to take on the new beats which were fused with choruses of happy islanders singing in rhythm. Ahead of him, Mitzy walked but slowed until Alex was beside her. Reaching down, she took him by the hand and held it in a friendly, consoling way.

"Can I stay at your house tonight?" she asked.

Chapter 6

The next day, Alex woke to a surprising fix. Beside him in bed was Mitzy, and beside the bed on a small table was a nearly empty glass of what appeared to be his Yucka, Swamp Juice, or preferably prescribed God knows what. His head was slightly pounding, a result of a mild buzz from the awful mixture, and his mouth was sticky which meant other mysteries existed that would be revealed in clever hints.

Mitzy, unaware she was a surprise, was sound asleep. Her smooth back, tan and gracious, flat and exposed, was shrouded by a sheet from the waist down, and the profile of her face was resting tenderly in the pillow.

“Damn, she’s young,” thought Alex. “What’s she want with an old bastard like me?”

He looked lovingly at her closed eyes, her smooth cheeks, her tiny ears that pinned back

finger-tucked bangs. He was amazed by her plump, pink lips that appeared like candy and the way she breathed, which formed a wonderful pulsing experience.

Alex thought for a moment and then the warmth hit him. He raised the sheet and discovered he was still dressed from the walk and still wearing the shoes from the night before. He dropped the sheet and laid his head back in tempered disgust.

“Well, sex didn’t happen,” he said.

Hearing his comment, Mitzy opened her eyes.

“What time is it?”

Alex looked at the clock. It was almost ten.

Chapter 7

Rays of heat shined through the windows. All through the house, the sun claimed spaces to light up. Alex rose from the bed, sauntered to the living room, made shade, and stretched in the glow of the new day. Around him there was an energy, and from where he stood he could hear children laughing, a person talking, and the all too familiar sound of air conditioners that hummed consistently.

Riding over the hum was the sound of bee bopping jazz. The jukebox was still playing from the night before and had landed on something fast, something that would have made the beat generation envious. Alex recognized the tune as a six fit shuffle, a crazy swing style he had grown accustomed to while working with the bands. He remembered, and how he remembered was strange, for at the time he was in a Boston motel,

taking some odd colored pills with a surf bird promoter nicknamed Toonster and listening to the groove. The guy who gave him the pills was complaining about not having any high speed, retro punk to slam dance to, and the fast six was all Alex had. Toonster popped a pill and fainted from exhaustion. The guy who gave them the pills thought Toonster had overdosed, and he split. Alex feared and loved those days. He turned to the jukebox and grinned an oozing, devilish grin.

"Coffee," said Mitzy, walking in, groggy.

Alex turned and felt wonder. Even in the morning Mitzy looked spectacular. She walked to the row of cabinets over the counter and opened just the right one, taking out the coffee tin and preparing the brewer. She added the right amount of grounds to the filter and the right amount of water to the reservoir. Then, once finished, she exited the kitchen and returned to the bedroom. Alex stood waiting, thinking, and soon the shower was hissing.

A knock at the door startled the scene. Alex

looked toward the door, the knock came again, and then he moved. Walking to a window, he looked out to spy. Tension took hold of him and he backed up. Placing his hand on the door, he opened it quickly, and the knocker was revealed. It was obnoxious Sully and his femme fatale from St. Louis, Claire Bridges. Sully was wearing his usual golf promoting apparel, khaki shorts, yellow short arm, and plastic smirk, but Claire was completely refined, wearing a summer dress befitting a fine day in Paris.

"Did we wake you?" asked Sully.

"You think I sleep till noon?" replied Alex.

Claire snickered and covered her grin with her finger. Sully turned to her. It was obvious she was not as sure about his demeanor as Sully was, and she stopped.

"Claire wanted to speak with you," he said, begrudgingly.

"Oh, really? About what?"

"My story, for the digest. Sully said you're a man with tailored tastes."

"I've got taste for lots of things," said Alex. "Better choice in clothes being one. But I'm not sure you want me. I'm more into hard liquor."

"But you go to the winery."

"I do, but mainly because Mitz wants to go."

"Mitz?"

"He means Mitzy," scoffed Sully, scornfully.

Alex smiled. He knew he had him with that one.

"Yeah, Mitzy," continued Alex, dusting off the subject. "She likes to go damn near every weekend, but as you can see, I'm a back porch kind of man."

"That's code for drug user," Sully whispered with hand to ear.

"I know what it means," affirmed Claire, pushing him away, "but I would never have thought that about you, Alex. This place is amazing. Is that Burleeze I see?"

"It is, and that there is SomaSoak brought in from strange port. I've never been, but I've got friends in strange places."

He smiled real big and rocked on his heels,

the way a person does who is overly confident and winning. She looked over Alex's shoulder and studied the room.

"May I?" she asked, inviting herself in.

Alex backed up and Claire entered the living room. She admired it all and smiled. "I never thought a place like this would exist way down here."

"There are some nice homes around here," commented Alex. "The university is right up the road. Lots of professors, teachers, judges, dropouts, hoodlums on parole. The whole shebang of people who tried and failed have whittled out some pretty interesting living spaces around here. Have you seen Lazyville?"

"Why, no."

"Sully," scolded Alex, shaking his head in a sigh. "Why in the hell didn't you take her to Lazyville?"

"It's not the kind of place I think you would like," said Sully.

"The hell it ain't," laughed Alex. "That's where

all the cool shops are." Alex winked.

"Yes, well," said Claire, breaking the argument, "I'll have to do that."

"Alex! Do you have any conditioner?"

Mitzy strolled into the room wearing nothing but a towel. Stunned, she froze. "Why didn't you tell me that Sully and his friend were here?"

"They just showed up."

"Don't let us bother you," said Claire. "Happens to me all the time."

"People show up while you shower?" questioned Mitzy. "That happens all the time?"

Claire grinned the grin of the stupid. Mitzy rolled her eyes and turned to Alex.

"It's in the drawer beneath the sink," he said.

Mitzy gave him a pensive look and then meandered off.

"She stays here sometimes," said Alex.

"I see," concluded Sully, in a suspicious tone, "and how often is that?"

"Why is that any of your business?" questioned Claire.

“I’m only asking,” replied Sully.

“It’s alright,” interrupted Alex. “She lives up the street. We walk and she stays. Life in a small town. Go figure.”

“Yes, well,” said Claire. “We don’t want to keep you any longer than we have to. Would you be up for an interview, Alex?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, if you are as outgoing as your reputation.”

“He’s not right for your story,” whispered Sully.

Claire turned slowly. She glared. Sully cowered.

“I can meet you here or anywhere you like,” she said.

“How about a walk? If that’s cool? Things seem different when you hoof it.”

“Okay. Sounds great.”

“Good. Then walk it is,” said Alex. “Be here in the morning around seven.”

“Okay.”

Claire smiled and focused her eyes on Alex. Hers were a deep rich green, and for a moment they connected, sharing a thought, but Sully was not impressed.

“Are we leaving?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s go,” he said, stepping out.

Claire gently exited the home, following Sully out the door and onto the porch. As they walked away, the thick morning air reminded Alex why hell is a place to fear. The heat was causing wavy lines to form over hot objects, and already a sweet, honey, pungent smell was churning up. Behind him, Mitzy, cool and moist from the shower, snuck up. She quietly approached and playfully raised her hands and cradled his cheeks. Startled, Alex flinched, spun around, and gasped for air, but then, just as soon as he did, he burst into laughter, and wrapping her in his arms, he pulled her close where she was snug and warm.

Chapter 8

Mitzy curled up on the couch with a cup of coffee dulled down with creamer and milk. Alex entered the room, a cup of honest dark roast in one hand and a bottle of B&B in the other.

“Ever had a Black Monk?” he asked, pausing and teetering as if he were on a stage.

“Can’t say that I have,” replied Mitzy, tucking her legs and taking a sip.

“It’s the simplest drink in the world. Watch.”

Alex poured the B&B into the cup. Mitzy’s eyes dimmed to sarcasm.

“You are a man of many talents, Sir Alex.”

“Did you know Benedictine was created in France in the 1600s as a cure for malaria?”

“Necessity is the mother of invention.”

“That and boredom,” said Alex, tipping to a sip.

“Does it work?” asked Mitzy.

Alex slurped back. “For a buzz, yes. To stave off sweating death, I’m not sure. The book does not go that far, but it would be worth checking into.”

He walked over, carefully holding the cup and bottle as though he were a balance and plopped down beside her, nearly sitting on her legs, and causing her to forcefully tuck even tighter.

“I’m going for a walk with that Claire Bridges,” he announced.

Mitzy revived.

“When?”

“Tomorrow morning. She wants to do a story on me. Thinks it will be good for the digest.”

“How fitting.”

“That golfin’ son of a bitch Sully told her that I was a man with tailored taste. Can you believe that?”

“No, not really,” replied Mitzy, sitting up. “I can’t believe it all. Sully hates you.”

“Your honesty is refreshing, Mitz. I need someone to write a letter to Congress. Would you be up for it?”

Mitzy scooted off the couch and walked to the kitchen. She left Alex alone on the couch for a few minutes. He sat there sipping his tuning tonic. He could tell it bothered her, the walk with Claire, but he had learned to not say anything when a female was angry. Waiting was best.

“How can you just sit there?” asked Mitzy, rushing back in.

“’Cause it’s my house and my couch.”

“Stop being a smartass. I’m serious. Why are you going with that woman?”

“’Cause she wants to do a story, and I thought it would be fun.”

“Fun?”

“Yeah.”

“And I’m not fun?”

Alex prepared to speak, but wisdom took hold as a whisper in his ear, telling him to smile and say his words in a clever, twisting way.

“You are more than fun, Mitz. You are a blessing.”

“Are you being condescending?” she asked.

"No!"

"Why are you being condescending, Alex?"

"I'm not," he replied. "I'm just sitting here, enjoying my medication, and you're thinking things that aren't true."

Mitzy stormed away. She vanished into the bedroom, leaving Alex to sip and think. Moments later she returned, opened the front door, and left without saying a word.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Alex rose from the couch and stepped out onto the porch to inspect. She was gone.

Chapter 9

The day progressed with no sign of Mitzy. Calls failed and stiff drinks replaced replies. In true Alex fashion, he spent most of the retired day on the front porch, fanning the heat, sifting the liver, softening the kidneys, and sipping the salt from his sweat.

“Why not get drunk?” he thought, and he did.

The steamy day had started with the Bloody Monks, but by boiling afternoon, lift off had been achieved on Moon Rakers. By desperate sunset, Alex was cruising ethereal dreams on Yucka, the gut wrenching, hell fire mixture he had made and dreaded. It numbed the face and caused the hours to drag, but above all else it made drinking a boring, dismal chore whereby one would have to pace their self on bitter fruit flavors that would have been appalling, given any other ritual.

To help him ease into his transition from

wide-eyed, bushy tailed to brim, dim twilight, he had made tiny sandwiches, loaded with carbs and spicy meat. Occasionally, he ventured inside to enjoy the success of a building buzz, but as the day progressed, the want for food became less and the need for drink became more.

Propped on the porch, with quick stick jazz pushing out of the jukebox and his skin a shiny edge, Alex peaked right as the sun was going down. Somewhere in his poisoned mind, he heard a voice. It was the voice of reason. It was the voice of planning. It was the voice that one hears in prison when days, weeks, and years are to be counted down and one begins to ledger the things they would do if they were free. Alex was hearing the voice because he had reached his limit. He was at the spot where a person either pukes or passes out. He watched the world around him nauseate into a churning blur, and without knowing it, he sobered in darkness.

Chapter 10

“Alex?”

Heavy heat plucked at his eyes, while distaff gestures pried back the haze of after hours.

“Alex?”

Burns of sour clung to his tongue. A dry, tender cough had lodged in his throat.

“Alex?”

Her figure stood before him, swaying around his neck, working as a weight around his neck, checking, examining, and calling his name in an insistent tone.

“Alex?”

“What?”

He came to, somewhat angered, and moved his lathered lips.

“What do you want?”

“Are you okay?”

A passerby on the sidewalk walked, amused

but concerned. Claire was leaning into him, her red summer dress hinting at her curves. Alex was a groggy stone in the chair, his limp body contorted. His clammy skin was spreading a ripe perfume. He opened his eyes enough to take in the dewy, morning light and absorb what had transpired.

"I'm on the porch," he ascertained.

"Yes. You are."

Alex closed his eyes. Claire, dumbfounded, straightened up. Her dress stiffened into a tube around her legs, the only curves she had became subtle cues. She looked inquisitively at the mess he had made. Half-eaten crumb sandwiches and glasses of odd shapes soiled with greasy fingerprint patterns remained on a small wicker table next to his chair. Hearing jazz, she turned her attention toward the house and bit her lip in hesitation.

"I'm not sleeping," he said.

She looked at him and stepped back.

"It's the damn Yucka," he said, clearing his throat and stretching. "Does it every time."

Again he settled and started to snooze. Claire

knelt down. She snapped her fingers, but he was out.

“Hey, if you want, we can do this some other time. I have a few days.”

“No, no,” said Alex, smacking his lips, coming and going. “I’m alright. Just let me have a moment to catch my breath.”

His moment faded into night-night and Claire stood. She placed her hands on her hips and spun around, causing the dress to widen out. She stood there, looking at the street and the homes with their nice, cozy yards and well-kept facades. A few people milled about, and a man was pushing a lawn mower. The lawn mower began to growl, and Alex opened one eye which he groomed with disdain.

“Isn’t there church today?” he asked. “I could have sworn this was Bible thumping land.”

“What house do you worship at?” joked Claire. “I’ll drive you.”

“I asked that to be a cynic. It is Sunday. Why isn’t that man in church?”

“Perhaps he is a demon,” replied Claire, “sent to torment you.”

“That would make more sense,” said Alex, in a low, depressive tone. “All anyone does around here is mow. These bastards live to mow. They’ll be mowing in their graves.”

“Well, at least they’ll be doing something. What will you be doing, Alex?”

He opened one eye and cursed with it.

“Sleeping.”

Jerking his body in a harsh, spastic way, as though he was kicking off bed sheets, he rose from his chair, turned abruptly, and walked into the house. Claire followed him inside, and instantly the cool of the air conditioner embraced her. She sighed and was pleased, but Alex rushed around a corner and then came back out in a frantic haste. The air conditioner outside stopped humming and there was an immediate, noticeable difference as the house began to broil and flex in the natural sauna that Southern summers generate.

“Too cold,” he said, walking toward the

bedroom. “The humidity does it, makes everything colder.”

Claire watched him exit into a door. She stood bewildered but focused. Moments later, Alex reentered the room missing his shirt and proceeded on to the kitchen. For an older man, thought Claire, he looked average, peppered chest hairs, a few spots, and a gut that was flat but not defined. Vaguely, he had the body of a man who had traveled, a man who could surf and look good in a suit, though she doubted he would approve of her summation.

There was definitely a mystique about Alex, and Claire could not help but peek around and watch him work.

“I’ll be a bit,” he said, preparing coffee.

“Take your time.”

He was not aware that she was admiring him. Even when he turned to catch her off guard, his mind was so off from putrid drink he did not put two and two together when she tried to conceal her fascination. He simply gave a dull expression and

finished with the kitchen.

"I'll take a shower," he said, hustling out. "Coffee's Arabica. Creamer and stuff in the fridge. Help yourself."

Chapter 11

Had Alex not gotten ill the night before and been ready when Claire arrived, the walk would have been nearly finished, or at least nearing the end with a stop for a cool drink, but as it was, they left the house close to ten, and already there was so much humidity in the air that nothing seemed sacred, not shirts, not shorts, not pants, not anything. If he could have gotten away with it, Alex would have stripped down naked, jumped his neighbor's fence, and stolen a swim, but Alex tried to remain a gentleman, despite a simmering temper. He tried his best to pretend he was fine, and to do so, he was aided by a glass of ice water and a brown woven gardener's hat. Beneath the hat he wore a pair of turtle shell sunglasses and a drunkard's smile, which consisted of a big grin whenever someone honked or said something worthy of a big grin. The rest of him looked as if he

was ready for a vacation in the Bahamas. He wore khaki pants, soft padded flip flops, and a bright beach shirt that sagged around his hips and projected the image of a person who was fond of birds with large beaks. They were a fitting pair, Claire in her red summer dress and Alex in his hodgepodge of lazy attire, but they were out of place for a town as small as Stugot where the best jobs were working for the government or at the nearby quarry. To the world of the heartland-damned working person, they looked like tourists or snobs, venturers from Chicago or the like, who came to town to sip and snip at the wineries, get one with nature, pose for pics, and cruise the back roads in cars that cost more than most rural homes while they prepared stories to share with family and friends in digital life, the world of the impersonal plastics where bright, perfect teeth were a birthright along with perfect children, perfect-planned, retired lives, perfect pets, and perfect plumes, groomed on clean, chemical city water.

Alex felt no special allegiance to Stugot. He

never took an oath or joined a club. He felt no allegiance to visitors like Claire nor did he uphold the anthropological pursuit that people like her vainly tried to express. All he felt was a slight throb around the eyes, and Claire was sure he was going to faint.

"We should go back," she said.

"No. Don't be silly. I'm fine. I do this all the time."

"Drink all night and go for walks?"

"Bums do it," he said.

"Yeah, but they don't have a choice."

"Do I?" he questioned.

Claire chuckled at his riddle. There was a philosophical tone to Alex's wit that made her speculate he was not as dim as he liked to play. This caused her to form a friendly smirk and a coy way of taking in whatever he said. She had to wait a few seconds before moving to the next subject just so she could convince herself that he was not only clever but also arrogant, the type of arrogant that fine experiences can cultivate.

“This heat,” complained Alex. “It never stops.”

“Have you ever been to Florida?”

“I have, but only for business. Hurricanes there, tornados here. I tell ya, it’s conspiracy to drive people out of the north. I don’t drink because I want to. I drink because I have to forget where I am.”

Claire grinned and sighed.

“You cannot be this bitter,” she proclaimed, in a fine, cliquish way. “You’re too young.”

He looked at her and nodded his head in fatigue.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of these people who thinks fifty is the new forty.”

“No, but science has worked miracles.”

“Then show me the fountain of youth,” said Alex, “where can I freely get gold. And what about that carburetor that gets limitless miles on a single tank?”

Claire laughed and ridiculed his disposition.

“But you chose this cozy town,” she said, dragged on by his angst.

“I chose no hassle, which I’m starting to get with the heat, the lawn mowers, and mosquitoes the size of small aircraft. I’m thinking of starting my own airport in my backyard.”

It was a humorous thought. For a moment she could see him out there, in the yard, directing traffic, but there was an irritability about Alex that got to her.

“Alright,” she asked, “where are we going? I am your guest.”

“Is that what you are?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Well, I was thinking we would mosey on down the street here for some sarsaparilla and maybe stop by and see if that sheriff of ours has been able to keep the Negro boys in line.”

“Get out,” snapped Claire, pausing with a wide jaw. “You did not just say that?”

“You wanted the full effect. You got it.”

“I didn’t expect that,” she scoffed, fending off the irrevocable. “How can you change like that?”

“It’s called honest,” said Alex.

"It's called racism."

He became serious and an air of respectability entered the conversation that made her think. He took off his hat. His hair was sticking up, fingering out in spikes. It was swirled and matted at the same time. Alex ran his fingers through his hair, and they glazed over with sweat and greasy conditioner.

"You come down here, Ms. Bridges, to do a story on the wineries, and you don't even know anything about the culture."

"Are you still drunk?"

"Unfortunately, not."

"And what makes you think this has anything to do with the story I'm writing? I'm writing about the wineries and what they mean to Rural America, not whatever it is you're implying."

"What I am implying is the culture. Look around you. These people have a past, and that past is their culture."

They had walked to the intersection of South Main Street and West Jefferson. A large church was to their left and large church was to their right. Cars

were parked along the street, and there was a pace about Sunday that was slow but building.

“With your cheeky comments," said Clair, "I now know what you think about these people.”

“Let me have it.”

“You think they’re bigots.”

“Hardly,” laughed Alex.

“Then what?”

“I think they’re hard-working people, real salt of the earth types who find themselves in that strange, peculiar spot of having to choose between two worlds.”

“Now, you’re religious. Why are drunks always religious?”

“’Cause drunks are searching for something greater than themselves,” he said harshly. She was intensely upset. Her eyes were dim. “Not everybody spends their weekends at the wineries, Ms. Bridges.”

He turned around and started to walk back to Morgan Street.

“Nor on their porch passed out!” she

expressed, sure and loud.

Alex stopped and turned to look back at her. She raised her chin in defiance.

“You don’t have to say it, and you don’t have to write it,” he said, “but you need to know it. It will come out better if you do.”

“And you know about that?” she asked, eyebrows raised, lips crimped on discretion.

Alex kindly tip touched his hat in a gentleman’s way and continued on, leaving her to ponder in the heat that was muggy and clinging.

Chapter 12

It was impossible for the remainder of the day to go without a hitch. Still unable to contact Mitzy, Alex laid down to rest, but his nap was interrupted by a pounding that was not in his head but at his door.

Disgusted, he shifted from his comfy place and marched to the living room. Peeking out through the peeking window, he saw an awful sight. On the porch was Sully, the walking billboard for famous slogans and dried up, yellowed men, freckled skin, blemished men who were potbellied putters with bleached, frazzled hair and white bands on fingers from rings of fallen femmes.

Bullied, Alex lunged and opened the front door in a flash to offset Sully, but he found himself staring straight at the mission man with eyes undeserving of forgiveness.

“See that?” scolded Alex, tapping his wired

finger to a tiny, outside button screwed to the frame. “It’s called a doorbell. Start using it.”

“What did you say to Claire?” asked Sully.

“You obviously know. You’re here.”

Alex backed away and retreated to the kitchen. Sully entered.

“She’s upset, Alex.”

Sully was standing in the living room, anticipating a pounce.

“How about a Woo Woo for your boo boo,” said Alex, waving a bottle of vodka so Sully could see it.

“Stop being cute.”

“It comes natural.”

“Is this all you do?” asked Sully. “I’ve heard stories.”

Alex moved out of the kitchen slowly. He walked into the living room, sipping from a nicely carved glass that, like most things in life, was discarded and saved. He crimped his lips and kissed the vapor, savoring the flavor while burning away his mossy throat.

"Then you know what comes next," he said, in a biting fix. "I drink and you storm out of here in a fury. Not a bad gig for a haphazard man in his fifties."

"Not bad for an alcoholic," concluded Sully. "You're a drunk, Alex." Alex eased down on the fat couch, the one so amply admired by all his fleeting guests, and peered up at Sully with a look of contempt. "You know, Alex," continued Sully, "you can walk all over town looking like you're on a safari, but you're just a has-been hippie."

"This," said Alex, after taking a well-placed sip, "from a man who carries a score card in his back pocket to make people think he's up on the game."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" asked Sully, offended.

"It means you're an unimaginative, uncreative, go with the flow kind of fellow."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, if you believe in the status quo."

Alex took a sip and discarded the thought.

“What you did to Claire wasn’t right,” said Sully, pushing through.

“Claire wants a story,” reminded Alex. “She wants to impress her editor, but it’s hard to impress somebody with something they already know. If I know St. Louis, and I do, she’s writing for folks who think dog parks are a good use of taxpayer dollars.”

Sully grinned. He waned interest and smirked.

“Is it true you have friends in the porno business?”

“The adult business? Yes.”

“Does Mitzy know?”

“She doesn’t care,” replied Alex, “and why do you?”

“Yes, but you have to admit, Alex, she probably does. I mean what type of young, attractive woman would like that hanging over her head?”

“I also have friends who are doctors,” reclaimed Alex, “who work on sick children and some who can work on that shitty personality you

have." Alex slammed his drink and stood. He held the glass at his waist, like a boastful politician hiding a speech. "You know, Sully," he continued, calm and collected, "I've put up with you smug, shit puritanical types all my life. You have only one way of seeing the world, and that's what you think is right. Well, a hell of a lot of good that has done." Alex walked into the kitchen, poured himself another drink, and reentered, still speaking, still declaring. "Wars, unemployment, drought, and misery. That's all you know, because that's all you were taught. Your teachers didn't want to offend your delicate ears with the plain truth. Your critical thinking skills revolved around apples and oranges. Well, here's a lesson for you and the teetotalers of the world. I might be a drunk. I might be the scum that Darwin noticed crawling from the lake of life. I might be the stuff behind your ears that you sniff and jerk from, but I've done things that you can only dream of. With this mind, I've made plans. With these hands, I've built empires. I've caused eyes to grow wide and smiles to form. I've put

money in the pockets of backers, hackers, and graveyard slackers, while all you've done is drive around and adorn yourself in that Dale Carnegie philosophy of winning spirit!"

Alex hyphenated his fingers, accenting, and chuckled. He eased down onto the suspicious couch.

"Are you finished bragging?" asked Sully.

"I'm sure more will come," replied Alex. "Come back in a few hours. Bring Cleeeeee - aire Bridges for a real hoot."

Alex waved his pointer finger in a boring, who cares sort of way, and excused himself with the tilted glass. In the process he took a long, smooth, poetic drink. Sully stared coldly, but with confidence.

"What about Nora?"

Alex paused. He pulled the glass away and sucked his lips. A sifting, sucking sound seeped out.

"What about her?" he asked, resting the glass on his leg, rubbing the rim, concentrating and direct.

"Rumor is she went schizo, and that's why you're here."

"Well, that rumor is true," said Alex. "Only it wasn't schizo."

"Then what was it?"

"She went dead."

Sully froze.

Alex took a fiscal drink and fell into an awful state of not caring.

"She's dead," he continued. He swirled the glass, whirling the clear, numbing nectar in a spinning, revolving way. "Died in her sleep from a broken heart." He raised the glass, tipped it to a nod, and slammed back what was left of his wild ride magic.

Sully was quiet. For the first time in a long time he wanted to be. His rented soul could not believe it. Slowly, he walked to the door and placed his hand on the knob, but instead of turning it, he just stood in the spot, thinking.

"Does that bother you?" asked Alex, noticing the wait.

“I didn’t know,” said Sully.

“And why should you? It’s none of your business.”

Alex formed a special gaze. Sully shook it off, excusing himself from what he could not answer. Turning the knob, he opened the door, stepped out, and closed it softly behind him.

Gone, a peace fell over the mesmerizing room as though some cool, snoozing breeze had blown through. It was not mystic, but good, a refreshing metaphysical taste of ever after, after a battle. A bead of sweat rolled down Alex’s brow and mixed with a tear that was turning to salt in the folded crease. He grinned on a memory of Nora, and whispered her name softly to the exposed nothing that surrounded him.

Chapter 13 (Twenty-five Years Earlier)

Cradling a white cup of hand warming Joe, sleeping, yawning Nora slipped through the tiny apartment so small it could serve as a proxy for a prison cell. Her petite, slinky figure looked gray and was illuminated by the morning light that was dulled through a heavy curtain behind the only window the room had to offer. She was nude, except for an oversized white t-shirt that covered her breasts and hugged her slender hips. Her blonde, Dutch bob cut was slicked down around her ears, and holding the cup to her lips, she blew softly across the brown, rippling surface.

Alex, younger, more brazen, more bold, but more naive, pushed back the covers in the single bed used by the two and watched her move across the room. The apartment was an efficiency with the living room and bedroom combined. The bathroom was at one end, and the kitchen was on

the other. Life for them was sandwiched between a toilet and tapestry.

Nora stopped at the edge of the bed. Her legs, once smooth but now stubbled, pressed against the cold metal frame that suspended creaking springs. Alex reached out to touch her, and she sipped the coffee in a daze.

“You gonna call Peirce today?” he asked.

“I called him yesterday, and the day before.”

Nora was staring off, at a dark wall. Alex relaxed. He ran his fingertips up and down her leg.

“Can I have some?” he asked.

She looked down at him, a peaceful look on her face.

“It’ll be alright,” he said.

“Yeah.”

Chapter 14 (Back to Present)

A sudden jerk brought him back. Alex had landed in a tazmer style, woolly chair that many had mistaken for no more than a sitting chair and was waking with a crooked neck from being propped up in a painful fashion. The dream, which had been real enough to make him continue reaching out long after Nora had vanished, had seemed to have lasted only a few minutes, but when Alex came to, he found himself in a silent house that was aged by hours. What light remained outside was barely visible. What part of the day that had made him scowl was tucked back into the box. The pink hue of sunset was replaced by a blueish gray that made the evening seem cool, and the windows were glowing with ambient light from a world that was automated to wake up when everyone was preparing for night-night.

Alex patted himself to make sure he was not

still dreaming, but then he had the awful epiphany placed upon him, the same epiphany that Descartes had revealed to him while locked in the infamous stove some four centuries prior, that perhaps he had no way of knowing whether it was a dream or not.

“Maybe I am dead,” he said, calmly, and to himself. “Maybe it is not so bad after all,” he continued in conversation mode. “Maybe so,” he concluded, “but I never planned to spend eternity in such a strange place as this.”

He took a fearful look around the room for others, ghost in the corners and shadows, but none were seen. Convinced upon inspection, he stood up quickly, and the glass that had contained the Yucka fell from his lap and ricocheted off the top of his foot. An intense pain latched hold of him, and he cursed the glass and hobbled on his leg, biting the burn, holding back the tide of profanity by clamping his mouth while bouncing his way to the kitchen.

Arriving at the sink, the dim around him, he

set the glass on the counter and turning on the faucet began to splash his face. In the process, there was a knock at the door. He composed and listened. The knock came again.

"Who is it?"

"Guess."

It was Mitz. If Alex had been born a dog, he would have begun wagging his tail. Pleased to have her stop by, he hurried to the door and opened it, leaving the water dripping.

"I'm not dead," he said, in a moment of forgetting.

"No, I don't think you are," she surmised. "But your face?"

"Water," referenced Alex, "from the sink."

He had an eager, childlike gaze about him. Mitzy coyly turned a cheek to him and gave him a darting, playful expression.

"You been drinking?"

"Most of the day."

"Drunk now?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You up for a walk?"

Alex stepped back. He favored his foot and limped to the kitchen. Mitzy gasped and followed.

"What's wrong?"

"Glass fell on my foot."

"Oh."

Alex stopped at the sink, and using a dishrag wiped his face. Sounds of being tired transferred from his soul to the room. Tossing the rag down, he turned, and Mitzy was propped against the table. The moon should have been the light. She was nothing but a line of color wrapping around executed curves. For a moment, she reminded him of Nora, and he paused.

"You got that look."

"Had another dream," said Alex.

"You need to stop drinking so much."

"I would," he replied, "but I'm afraid I'd stop dreaming."

He walked to the table and placed his eyes on hers. He stood for a few moments, just peering deep into them. They were so wonderful, so

vibrant, so full of everything he wanted.

Mitzy darted and broke the spell. Alex shifted and exited the room. He flicked the light switch to the living room, and a beam of light sliced through the darkness as he swaggered away.

“Where’d you go?” he asked.

“Here, there,” said Mitzy, over her shoulder and remaining in the kitchen. A silence overtook the scene and pushed her out. She entered and stood in the living room, alone, and waiting. “I heard what you said to that woman.”

She did a quick spin and Alex returned, wearing a new pair of brown khakis and rolling a clean shirt down over his hairy chest. The shirt was from some funky bar in Key West. It had as a mascot a woman doing the splits while holding up a drink.

“Nice,” said Mitzy.

“Yeah, found it. Who told you?”

“Sully.”

“Sully? When did you see him?”

“He stopped by earlier. Told me all about it.

Said he was going to talk to you about it."

Alex shrugged and reentered the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, and taking out some ice cubes, he walked to the cabinet and removed a tall, plastic cup, the kind that was cheap and not missed if left behind.

"Want some water?"

"No, thanks. I'll share yours."

Alex grinned and dropped the cubes into the cup. Turning on the faucet, he filled the cup, and before taking a drink, he held it out to her for the first sip.

Mitzy smiled and moved to the cup. She took it from his hand, and placing it to her lips proceeded to take a long, quenching drink. Finished, she handed it back and wiped her mouth.

"Sully was just here," he said.

"I thought so," replied Mitzy.

"A few hours ago," corrected Alex. "He brought up Nora." Mitzy put her head down, in a way that signaled she was hiding something. "Did you tell him about Nora?"

It took a few, but then she looked at him.

“He wanted to know,” she said, in a way that beckoned understanding. “It was a long time ago. I guess he remembered.” Alex shook his head and took a drink. “Does it make you mad?”

“That you told him?” he asked, straightening. “No, not really, but Sully doesn’t need to know that.”

“People wonder about you,” she said. “I get asked.”

“And the less they know, the better,” he affirmed.

Mitzy pushed off from the table, took a few steps, and spun around.

“Are we gonna walk or stand here?”

“You don’t like the dark?”

“I don’t like this conversation.” She moved close to his chest, so close that she began messing with his shirt. “I like it when we don’t fuss.”

“We’re not fussing,” he said. “We’re talking.”

“Sounds like fussing,” she said, tucking her head in a cute bashful way.

"Then what you take for fussing is different than what I do."

"Did you miss me?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Yes," he replied, softly, calmly, and with a sureness. "I did." Alex raised his finger and propped up her chin. It trembled against his poignant pointer. "I don't know what we are," he said, "but I like being with you."

Mitzy smiled.

"Me too, but I can't be her," she said. "I'll never be her."

"You're right," he reminded, "but you can be you, and that is what I want."

She eased back slowly and moved toward the living room. Alex watched her glide away, out of sight and into another zone. Standing, idling, his mind began to think back to the dream. Mitzy was really something, something to cherish, something to hold. He kept the thought, and turning on the faucet splashed a fresh stream of water into the cup. Mitzy, amused but anxious, poked her head around

and looked at him.

"Today," she said, in a frustrated tone.

"It's night," he said.

"Night, day, it's all in how you look at it," she replied.

Alex topped off the cup and scooted in her direction, sipping and passing it off to Mitzy as he hurried to the door. He paused before the exit and waved her through. Mitzy slipped out, and Alex closed the door.

Chapter 15

Together Alex and Mitzy ventured off, side by side through the humid, trailing air and off into the orange glow of street lights and slick pavement that shined from moisture and being worn down by rolling rubber. Homes around them had yellow beacons of light showing from them. The windows of the homes were rectangle previews of life being spent. As they walked, sneaky peeks revealed flickering televisions and shadows of entities. Dogs barked off somewhere, amplified by the enduring silence of Sunday, and Mitzy was convinced a different route should be taken.

Jerking a right from her usual left, she started away from Morgan Street, on toward West High Street, and then south to Main where she made a left and continued traveling.

Up Main she went. Alex struggled to keep up. The ice water in his defacto cup was jostling about.

The cubes were changing shape from square to round. Mitzy was moving at a frantic pace, and with every step she took, she smiled and grinned.

“Can you keep up, old man?” she asked.

Alex was panting. He was fighting to survive the heat and hell that was the Sunday sidewalk of Stugot summer bliss.

“I need you to slow down,” he said.

Mitzy laughed and did a spin. She tripped, stumbled, and landed hard on the concrete, grinding her leg. Tears and shivers took hold. Tight grips seized her mind as she began the agonizing realization that she had caused severe damage to her sassy skin.

“It hurts,” she cried.

“I know,” said Alex, tossing the cup. “Here.” Leaning down, he braced her arm around his neck and gently lifted.

“Alex,” she begged.

“Let’s go home.”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch,” winced Mitzy, limping up. “My God, it hurts!”

She started to chuckle, the way a person does when they cannot believe the inevitable. Haggard, Alex helped her down the sidewalk.

“We must look like a sight,” she said.

“I’m going to be sick,” said Alex.

“You and me, walking like this.”

“I’m sick.”

“What?”

“Sick.”

They were outside the Brod Library, a Stugot landmark, ready to turn onto West High Street, when Alex gave her the news. Easing her down onto the ancient steps, the word, sick, kept repeating from his crusty lips. Mitzy was frightened slightly, calm but alert that a great change had occurred.

With her secure, Alex left and hurried off to the shadowed walls of the library where he buried his face in a bristly shrub that helped to hide a sign that read, “No Skateboarding.”

Mitzy was in pain, but could not help but defeat a chuckle. Alex groaned and coughed.

Disgusting sounds gurgled from his gut, and Mitzy fanned away the heat and stench that was foreboding.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"It was that Yucka," he slurred, rising up from the bristles, sucking back the dripping saliva. "That hellish concoction has a tendency to do this."

"Then why do you drink it?"

"'Cause it also has the high power tendency to get one seriously intoxicated." He crawled back to her and laid down, jousting his head against an exposed root. "You don't have to waste precious, valuable minutes like you have to with inferior drink."

"All that, to get a hangover?" questioned Mitzy.

"To enjoy one," he whispered. "You learn things from regrets."

Philosophical time had fallen on them. Alex closed his eyes, remembering something that he had tucked away. Mitzy, still in pain, nudged him.

"Get me home, you pitiful thing you."

Alex rolled over and elbowed his way up. Grunting, he rose to a position where he resembled a prairie dog taking a curious peek at the world. Silence slapped him. He froze for a moment. Mitzy stared up at him, her wonderful eyes pulling in the ambient light like the mirror in a Newtonian scope. On his knees in the sacred spot, with she in such dazzle, Alex viewed up and down Main Street. Nothing could be seen.

"All the souls are in church," he said.

"Good place for them," said Mitzy. "You should consider the same."

"Yeah," he growled, with a vesper spit. "Well that would be good and all," he concurred, pushing himself up and gaining his footing, "but first I have to remember where I put it."

Alex reached down for her. She took his hand, and he yanked her up. She flew up and collapsed against his figure, her weight pressing against him.

"Hell of a place to dance," she said, amused but rubbing the pain. "We have no music."

“We’ll make our own,” said Alex. “The downtrodden have always improvised.”

Mitzy grinned. Her eyes became coy.

“I hurt too much to laugh very loud,” she said, “but know I am in here.”

She referenced to her noggin by tapping her finger to her forehead.

“Yes,” surmised Alex. “Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 16

Back up West High Street they went, merging left onto Morgan where they walked passed Alex's house as they continued straight to Mitzy's near West Spring. Alex had anchored Mitzy to his shoulder. To make the slow creep forward enduring, he distracted her with a rattling story about a trip he and Nora had taken to Pike's Peak.

"I was going through my Kerouac phase," said Alex. "This was in the eighties when cocaine was big, and I fancied myself as a new age hipster. I purchased a Studebaker, thinking it would be fun. Well," he said, pausing, "that was a horrible mistake. Poor Pitiful Pink, a name I gave it because it was bologna pink, rode like hell. My leg ached for nearly two weeks because of the clutch being so hard to press down, and it broke down on us. We had to walk five miles in the rain before anybody stopped to pick us up."

Mitzy was trying to listen. She grinned, but her leg was on fire.

“You can’t even imagine how bad my leg feels,” she said.

Alex shifted to get a look. There was so much blood. It glistened in the street lights like black ice made known by an accident. Mitzy caught his examination.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“I’ve seen worse.”

“That means it’s bad,” concluded Mitzy. “I’ll have a scab for two weeks and a scar for a lifetime.”

“I got some cream to take care of that.”

“Is it legal?”

“You have to ask?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve seen your medicine cabinet.”

“Finest drugs that money can buy.”

“And money is the key word.”

“Legal for all debts private,” joked Alex.

Mitzy rolled her eyes. She knew he had friends on and off the grid. It was an attraction, to say the least.

“To answer your question,” continued Alex, ‘I wouldn’t have it if it was legal. Why waste your time with bullshit. America is full of bullshit get-ya-bys. We’re a jerry-rigged nation.”

“You have got to be the most opinionated person I have ever met,” said Mitzy. “How did Nora put up with it?”

The question took him back to Nora frantically running around the dim apartment, searching for a piece of paper. In his tired mind, it played out like a tape loop, her sifting through papers, an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips, her hair a mess, her shirt stained with reds and yellows.

“Alex?”

He jerked and focused. They were still moving, lumping it down the street, but it felt as though they had stopped or slowed to a passive state.

“You still with me?” asked Mitzy.

Alex grappled his emotion. It was fighting him.

"I'm fine," he said, soft. "I just get to thinking."

Inside it made her nervous and cautious. The thoughts were coming more often, more than they had when they had first met. Then, Alex was somber, drinking and pretending things were alright, but people break down when they become comfortable with their surroundings. Small town life was predictable, but that same predictability could also ruin life, make it not worth living when it transformed from comfort to the mundane. Boredom unbroken is a killer. With that thought Mitzy squeezed Alex. He was like a whirlwind that a person chases, except it is not the wind they capture but the floating leaves. She wanted to hold him forever, but there were things keeping her from it. She felt those things in the way his body would tremble and warm. Alex had a smell about him, sweet and sugary, honey and nectar, fermenting memories saturated in forgetting booze. He was everything polite, authoritarian society feared, an anti-establishment radical whose dossier was invisible ink dots on an agent's arm,

and still without Alex and his risk taking kind, nothing would exist that made life worth living. His very denial of conformity composed the essence of the grand dream that many had found to be a pension planned birthright, and Alex may have been despised by those who wanted a better way, but deep down his lock-breaking vision was necessary to the whole function of it all, and even the better way folks had to admit that his “speed bump removal” philosophy was too, a part of their open source agenda that they so bravely refused to properly cite.

Chapter 17 (Two Weeks Later)

A brown, butler derby was snug on her head. A Schanade scarf was dangling from her shoulder. With prim, proper lips, Mitzy was propped up in the center of the room, her lovely tan legs folded Indian style, her shiny shoulders exposed through an athletic tank top, and she appeared to be channeling some far off entity with palms up. She was humming, and cordial music played from hidden speakers. Alex entered the room, a look of austere confidence on his face and a brandy snifter topped with Cognac lifted to his nose.

The two were in Mitzy's house, a modest, two-story, teacher type house with a white facade, green screened shudders, and a porch attached to the front. The house had belonged to a teacher and had the feel of perfection, except it was deathly hot, a box furnace cooled only by ceiling fans and the occasional angel breeze. Mitzy lived this stubborn

way, because she refused to run the air conditioner.

"It is waste of electricity," she would argue when asked. "If you don't want to sweat, lose weight!"

She insisted on sweating, which she did very little of, and this made her an envy amongst large crowds at the wineries and outdoor gatherings that found the smothering heat of Rural America summer to be suffocating. Alex had grown accustomed to her life in the stove, but even bees will sometimes leave the honey, and as one doling playboy remarked, "If she didn't have that ass, nobody would come around."

The walls of the home were barely scarred with picture-hanging nail holes, and the boundary trim of the interior was high polished, glazed over brown. Like Alex's home, the floor was exposed wood, old wood with knots, and when a person walked across the floor it sometimes creaked in a loving way that made one feel as though they were walking in the same steps as the previous occupant. The wood had obviously been harvested from

another home, something from the twenties, and Mitzy adored the decoration and rural craftsmanship.

On the ceiling, above them, a small chandelier acquired from an antique store added to the decor of the scattered bookshelves, and around them faint walls made ambience, some of which were covered in a very old wallpaper. Alex was intrigued by the pattern. He often rubbed his fingers across the coarse texture, and when he did, he always concluded with an expert's knowledge that it might be El Contoro Script, a very popular design in the latter nineteenth century but very expensive.

"Peasants can't afford this," he would say.

He sipped his drink and savored the thought of touching the walls. Mitzy said nothing and enjoyed the thought of nothing but herself in the center of the bending room. Alex, perplexed, sat down in a rocking chair. He began to rock and the floor began to crackle, sending an annoying sound into the room that was very distracting. Mitzy

opened one eye and spied him down.

"Stop that," she said, in a monotone voice. "Go outside. I'm meditating and really into this space."

Alex did as he was told and rose from the chair. He opened the front door, which was already open and allowing air to pass through a screen door, and stepped outside onto the porch.

The door closed gently and clicked shut. Alex looked over his shoulder. Through the window, he could see Mitzy, still in her trance. He chuckled to himself and took a curing sip of his Cognac, before moving to a chair where he sat down.

He was sitting there, composed and relaxed, when a high polished, BMW convertible pulled to the curb and parked. It was an odd sight, out of the norm for Stugot, and Alex took notice and concern to heart. Sitting in the car were two men in their early thirties, both wearing sunglasses, both lawyer looking types fresh out of Harvard, both wearing the kind of clothes that Alex wore, lazy day clothes for well-groomed lives. The men talked for a few

moments, nodding and laughing, acting sure of themselves, and then they got out of the car in unison, their figures rising high above the tiny frame.

The driver pulled down his glasses and focused his gaze on the porch. He pushed them back up, and the two approached the house. Alex remained calm, but he peeked into the door. Mitzy was still meditating, unaware they were approaching. He decided not to disturb her and kicked back a cocky shot from the snifter.

“Are you Alex?” asked the man who had been driving.

“It depends on who’s asking.”

“My name is Cowlin Ridge, and this is my business partner, Lessle Taylor. We’d like to ask you some questions.”

“You cops?”

“Far from it. We’re businessmen.”

“You sound like cops,” said Alex. He peered over the men’s shoulders. He admired the car. “Minimum wage go up?”

The men smirked and shook their heads, but gathered themselves when Mitzy opened the screen door and emerged from the house. Each slowly removed his sunglasses to take her in more clearly.

“Who are you?” she asked, confused.

“Businessman,” replied Alex. “Here to ask me questions and try to steal you from me.”

“Is that your car?” asked Mitzy, pointing.

“Yeah,” replied the driver.

“I see it’s working,” added Alex.

“Nice,” nodded Mitzy, coyly digging it. “Hey,” she said, recognizing Alex, “I’m going uptown for a moment. I’ll be back in a bit. Want anything?”

Mitzy bounced down off the porch. The eyes of the men followed her jiggles.

“Here,” said Alex, digging for his wallet. “Stop and get some shrimp. You guys ate?”

“We’re fine,” said the driver.

“You’re fools,” continued Alex, handing over money. “Nobody turns down grilled shrimp.”

Mitzy took the money and folded it between her fingers. She flashed a wink at the driver and

walked away. The men scanned her with their eyes.

"That be Mitz," interrupted Alex, pulling their eyes back to him.

Cowlin grinned. He took the hint.

"We come in peace," he said, holding his hands up. "All we want is to ask you some questions."

"Yeah, I guess you do," figured Alex. "What do ya drink?"

"Don't drink during business," said Cowlin.

"Then what you want with me?" asked Alex, in a disgusted tone. He turned and entered the house, making his way to the kitchen. Cowlin and Lessle followed him in, but stopped in the place where Mitzy had been meditating. "How'd you find me?" continued Alex, separated from them by a wall. He had arrived at the bottle of Cognac that was resting on a cushion of straw finely woven for such things as fine bottles of booze.

"Sully Higgins," said Cowlin.

Alex paused. He thought for a moment, amused and flattered. He reached for the bottle of

Cognac and professionally unscrewed the lid. Gently tipping the neck, he filled the sifter and replaced it like an expert. He reentered the room and walked past them, back to the porch, and back to his seat.

Cowlin and Lessle stepped out.

"You talk?" asked Alex, referring to Lessle.

"He does."

"Then I want to hear him," said Alex.

"What do you want to hear?" asked Lessle.

"I want to hear the voice of a man that is about to bite off more than he can chew." Alex took a long, enjoyable sip. "How much do you want?"

Cowlin laughed. He looked at Lessle, who was speechless, and trying to discern the meaning. Cowlin rubbed his eyebrow with his finger.

"You don't even know what we want?" he said.

"Yeah, I do," replied Alex. "You want money to start a club or bar, something you're too ashamed to go to the bank for."

Lessle stepped forward.

"We were told that you had friends."

“By who? Sully? He’s an idiot. He goes all over town spreading rumors about me.”

“But do you?”

“Yeah, but none that concern you. I’d be willing to bet just about everybody has a friend.” Alex took a sneaky sip. He licked his lips clean of the poison, and moved in on a thought. “What is it that you two do?”

“Does it matter?” asked Lessle.

“It matters a lot,” replied Alex.

“I manage hotels,” he said.

“And you?” questioned Alex.

“Same thing,” replied Cowlin, “but I also own apartments and rent to low income families.”

“Real saints you are then,” joked Alex. “I bet your universities have you on the wall of fame right next to the President and the guy who volunteered for strategic combat action.”

A scowl darted from their eyes.

“We were told you were reasonable.”

“I am,” said Alex, “but I’m not stupid. You want a loan? Call a bank. Don’t come to this porch

or this street again."

They were not used to orders, but Alex had a way of getting his point across. Mitzy had seen it, and commented on it, and so too had others. It was a practice made famous by Al Capone who was said to have spent hours perfecting a stare that would intimidate an opponent into submission. Both men got the stare, and they got the message. Alex was not to be messed with. They backed away as bullies do when they are looking down the barrel of a loaded gun.

Chapter 18

A fire burned in Alex's gut, made hotter and brighter by stiff drink and stifling humidity that had laid siege to the afternoon. How dare Sully involve him in the conniving wants of wannabe gangsters. It was one of the top things that Alex despised about the "real" world, the world of degrees and titles, the world of names on doors and plaques on walls. Everybody with a grin and two-bit sign was on the make, everybody from the anal retentive, gate-keeping secretary who answered calls, as if she had taken a course in being rude, to the smug, prick boss she protected from any calls that were meant to get to the truth. No matter where Alex turned in the world of the honest, hard-working-American he found bastards, people who had jobs where they could ruin lives and cast judgement. He knew the two men that visited him were wanting to start a business off the grid, a

company, an adult bookstore, or something they would not want to reveal, but Alex had given up that sort of thing with the passing of Nora. He still had friends, but they were his friends. The time had come to have a heart to heart with Mitzy.

“What have you told Sully about me?” he asked.

They were hidden in the backyard. Smoke from the grill lingered. Leftovers of fine shrimp were on two plates. Large canopy trees shrouded them, and pecker flies whirled about in clumps. Sweat dripped off his brow, and rays of sunlight made his face look orange. Mitzy was amazed by the question. She turned to him, intrigued.

“Who were those men?” she asked.

“That’s why I’m asking. What have you told Sully?”

“I told him that you used to work in the music business, that you had friends who were into computers.”

“Did you tell him I had friends who had money?”

Mitzy chuckled.

“I need to know. It’s important.”

“Serious? We are not having this conversation, are we, Alex? The food has been great. In a few hours, we’ll go for a walk.”

“Did you?” he asked again, insisting she answer.

“Yes,” replied Mitzy, but sarcastically. “I told him you had connections. Are you satisfied, Capone?”

Alex sighed. Mitzy stood up and dusted off her bottom. She took his plate.

“What’s the big deal?” she continued. “Everyone has connections. You act like you’re the only person with friends.”

Mitzy walked to the house. She entered through the back door. She was standing at the sink, rinsing off their plates when Alex entered the room.

“Those friends I have are real,” he said. Alex paused and continued. “I don’t tell you not to say anything because it is for personal reasons. I tell

you because it's not too smart."

"So I'm stupid?" she asked.

"I never said that," replied Alex.

"But you implied it. What is up with you, Alex? Is it the alcohol? Is it Nora? You're acting strange."

Mitzy opened the dishwasher and dropped the plates inside. Slamming the door, she stormed from the room. Alex followed her to the bathroom where she closed the door, but he pushed it open.

"Hey!" she shouted.

"Listen," he said. "You need to know something."

"What? That you're wanted for crimes in several states or nations?"

"Maybe," he replied.

An awkward silence hit them. She doubted.

"Are you?" she asked.

Alex grinned and propped himself against the door frame.

"I don't mean to argue with you," he said, showing empathy, " and, no, as far as I know, I'm

clear to travel."

Mitzy smiled.

"But there are things you don't know. Things I want you to know, but I won't tell unless you agree not to say anything."

"Will I be an accomplice?" she asked, in a serious, wake-up sort of way.

"No, I don't think so. I'm only going to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"So help you God?"

"Is there one?" he asked.

"I hope," she replied. "It would be nice to believe in something."

Alex leaned down and kissed her on top of her head.

"Believe in this," he whispered.

When he said it, she closed her eyes, and savored the moment. Alex had captured something that was elusive. He rebounded and let her be.

Chapter 19

The hours caused the daylight to fade. Shadows stretched, and the windows began to darken. Mitzy's house was still warm, but beginning to cool, the way good, old homes do when they had been built right.

Mitzy entered the main room, the room where she meditated, and forgot about her troubles. Alex was in the cranky rocking chair, gripping and rocking. The rockers creaked against the hard wood floor causing a crackling sound to resonate. He had one leg crossed over the other and resting on his leg, as though it were table, was the sifter filled with Cognac. He glared at her as she bent down and took a seat on the floor.

"You know why I don't wear a suit?"

"'Cause you don't own one?" replied Mitzy.

Alex grinned.

"Do you know the other reason I don't wear a

suit?"

Mitzy shook her head.

"It's because I've seen a lot of people who wear suits do bad things."

Mitzy looked oddly at him. Her eyes were very tender. Alex took a sip and uncrossed his legs. He leaned forward and finished off the drink. Mitzy's eyes widened as he took down the burn. To her, Alex was like a drinking God, a man whose only mission in life was to drink, and because it was, he always concluded great thoughts with a lasting rinse.

"When those men aren't driving around in a fancy car," he said, placing the sifter on the floor, "they're wearing suits, and when they're not wearing suits, they're busy driving around in fancy cars. It's either suits or shorts. They don't know how to be constant."

Prophetic it was, and Mitzy leaned back until she was flat on the floor, her beautiful athletic legs stretched out, her firm stomach showing through her tight tank. From where he was, Alex could

watch her breathe. He could see her lower part move up and down, while her eyes focused on the ceiling and her mind unlocked another subject.

"What happened in Denver?" she asked.

"That's part of it," said Alex.

"I know," she replied, pushing herself up. "That's why I need to know."

Chapter 20

Still on the floor, Mitzy propped herself up and looked intensely at Alex. Outside, a car drove passed. It hummed away and Alex put his head down.

“I was a loan shark," he said.

Mitzy’s eyes widened. She chuckled in an unsure way.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but that’s as blunt as I can put it. I helped people who couldn’t go to the bank to do what they really wanted to do.”

Mitzy shifted and pulled back. A great dread came over her. She looked at Alex, as though she no longer recognized him. He seemed more like a demon than desperado.

Alex reached down and picked up the sifter. He stood up and peered down at her. “You needed to know,” he reminded.

He said it in a cold way, a way she had not

heard him speak before, as though he was trying to push her back into the dark world from which he had slithered.

Alex made it to the kitchen, where he added more Cognac to his wired mind. Mitzy entered, anger in her throat.

“Do you still do it?”

“No.”

Alex took a sip. The kitchen was warm. Sweat glistened across his skin, making him shine in what light there was.

“What about Nora?” Mitzy asked. “Did she know?”

“She found out, but I tried to keep it a secret.”

“Must be hard to keep it a secret that you’re in the mob.

“I wasn’t in the mob,” said Alex.

“And what was this bullshit about you living in a tiny apartment?”

“That was true.”

“No,” snapped Mitzy. “Why were you? Why were you living in a place like that when you had all

that going on? It doesn't make any sense. Are you lying, or are you really good at making people think your lies are true?"

"Hey, wait a minute," he said, defending himself. "I wanted you to know, because you needed to know. I didn't tell you so you would yell at me."

"This is something I never even should have known. I don't like knowing it now. How the hell do I know what you have following you around?"

"There is nothing following me."

"You could have just stayed in your house and left me alone, but, no, you had to get in here. In here." She stepped forward, tapping her chest. "You don't get it, Alex. People like you are what makes this world bad."

Silenced surrounded them. Their eyes were matched.

"Well, lucky for you," said Alex, soft and somber, "there are few like me."

Alex stood up. He finished his drink and sauntered into the kitchen. Holding the bottle and

sifter, he walked to the door and showed himself out. Down the street he went, doing it confidently, as though something great was waiting for him. Mitzy followed and stepped out onto the porch. She watched him walk away, his failing figure blurred by tired tears.

Chapter 21

The next day Sully took a powerful blow to the face from Alex's clinched fist. It happened on Main Street, outside the Causeway Grill, in broad daylight, close to noon when everybody was packing the street for lunch.

Afterward, Alex did not flee. He did not beg for understanding or wrestle with the disjointed crowd. He simply walked inside the restaurant, as though nothing had happened and sat down at the bar where he quite stubbornly ordered a Rhett Butler, which he was rationally denied while a group of men safely subdued him.

By the time Mitzy had learned the news, several hours had passed. Alex had already spoken to a lawyer and was released, but of all the things that were the strangest, it was Claire Bridges who came to his rescue and oversaw the negotiation. She had returned to Rural America to finish her

story, and after learning that Sully had spread rumors about Alex, she defended the bruiser on the merit that his honor was hurt. In the end, Alex was cut loose, ordered to stay away from Sully, and ordered to pay any bills related to the assault.

"You need to lay off the booze," said his lawyer. "Next time it will be jail."

"There won't be a next time," said Claire, as she escorted Alex away from the police station.

Alex was silent. His pride and reputation, or what was left of both, were destroyed, but Claire had pity on him. Before they pulled out of the parking lot, she turned to him.

"You need to get out of here," she said.

"And go where?"

Claire's car was small and cozy, a sporty, little thing that cost a pretty penny. Alex liked it. It smelled new, and because it was new, the air conditioner was quick to cool.

"How about back with me?"

"To St. Louis? Hell, no. I was there years ago with a band. Damn near got arrested there too."

"I'm not a band, Alex. I'm a writer. Getting away from all this would be good for a person with your personality."

"My personality? Jesus, woman. I'm not a daredevil. I'm an old man with a past that seems to get in the way."

"Precisely."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"I'm just saying," continued Claire, raising her eyebrows, "a change would do you good."

"So would a Manhattan message," he replied, fading, "but oh, well..."

Alex pouted. He sucked up his fate and for a few seconds ignored her, but he had to admit Claire was not all bad. She was smart, witty, and for a woman in her forties, she was in very good shape, but more than anything, she was being kind. He could sense it. She was a good person. They were hard to find.

"I got baggage," he said.

"We'll strap it down," she joked.

"I'm serious, Claire. Mitzy hates me. This

town hates me. I don't want you or anyone else to hate me. I think it would be best if I just stayed out of the public for a while."

"Pity party," she interrupted, covering her ears. "I don't want to hear it. No, sir. No."

Alex looked at her in an odd, I-lost-my-dog kind of way.

"Are you being serious?" asked Claire. "Is this the Alex that told me, 'I know nothing about culture?' Excuse me for breaking the news to you, but this is not culture. This is a small town, and you are a man who is bored with it." She shifted in her seat. "Sully's not your problem," she said. "The problem is you."

"Are you a psychologist?"

"Don't change the subject. You can do that with that child you run around with but not with me."

"We prefer to walk, and she's in her thirties," reminded Alex.

"Oh, please, she's a baby. I'm surprised her father doesn't come over when she visits."

"That would be a miracle 'cause her father's dead."

"Really?"

"No, but it got you to pause for a moment. What makes you think I'm bored with this town? Even if it is full of Bible thumpers, I like the no hassle environment."

"You call this no hassle?" she asked, referencing to the scene around them.

"It's a small price to pay for putting up with bullshit."

"If it weren't for me, old man, you'd be in jail right now!"

"True, but it wouldn't really be jail. It would be small-town jail, and that's not the same as full-blown prison."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"No. I'm not," he said. "I'm just saying."

Claire chuckled, sighed, and playfully growled into a smile. She reached up and touched his whiskered, clammy face.

"I know why Mitzy is attracted to you," she

said, “but I see through that wonderful charm. You are a sailor, searching for a lighthouse.”

“Now I know you’re a writer,” admitted Alex, amused, “because I would have chosen a better word than lighthouse.”

“We’re going to St. Louis.”

“Like hell!”

“Like yes!” affirmed Claire, slapping his knee.

“I got things to do,” pled Alex.

“Like what? Drink?”

“I can’t afford to get behind.”

“I’m surprised you can afford to get ahead.”

It made him laugh. He stretched his legs, and turned to look out the window. Cops were everywhere. The whole town had turned out for the event.

“Damn, I messed up, didn’t I?”

“I’m not going to lie and say you didn’t,” said Claire.

Alex turned to her.

“You’re honest.”

“It pays.”

"Never did for me. Tell you what, I'll go with you to St. Louis."

Claire clapped.

"But, on one condition."

"Anything?"

"You be you, and I'll be me. If I want to drink, you let me. If I want to get totally plastered and sleep outside, you let me."

"And, what am I supposed to do while you're being a model citizen?"

"You be you."

Claire was perplexed. Ultimatums were never her high point, but she wanted "The" Alex experience. There was something about him, something she could not place her finger on that needed to be explored.

"You are a complicated man," she said.

"Not really," he said, softly. "I just believe in living."

"Some would call it dying."

"Dying is what we are all doing, all the time," he said. "I'm just aware we are."

Chapter 22

"I got a philosophy," said Alex, stirring a Screwdriver. Claire was resting on his red couch. Alex entered the room from the kitchen. "Live life to the fullest." He took a crooked lip sip of the fumed up orange juice and sauntered to a window, where he peeked out through a curtain.

"Uh, huh," he said, as though he had it all figured out.

"I think I need to get going," said Claire. She stood abruptly. "I need to check on Sully."

Alex turned to her. She smiled politely. His mind was racing on the thought. Claire could sense the anger and walked over to him. She touched his shoulder and kissed his cheek.

"Get some sleep," she said.

Alex opened the door and Claire stepped out. She did so in a very dignified manner. He followed her into the horrible heat, the drink in hand,

leisurely held at his waist. Claire fanned herself and paused.

"I'll be back tomorrow to see if you've melted."

Alex took a fighting drink. Claire grinned and started toward her car. She was nearly to the curb when Alex stepped forward to the edge of the steps. She looked up at him and smiled again. She was a woman who liked to smile, and Alex nodded while taking a pensive but planned sip.

Chapter 23

Night fell on Stugot. Morgan Street was a hum with streetlights and yard lights and ambient greens and shaded hues of orange bleaching the darkness, illuminating shadows, and spreading out flat lights and round curves over the grass and slippery, shiny street surfaces.

Around the town, air conditioners vibrated, their metal shrouds and protective vents rattling against loosened screws.

It was late, close to eleven when Mitzy returned from her nightly walk. She traveled down West High and took a daring right onto Morgan, where she walked confidently and smug past Alex's house, trying her best to ignore the gray facade.

She arrived at her home and was startled when she noticed a figure on her porch, but after her hand touched her chest, Alex emerged from the shelter and waited for her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"What's it look like?"

"It looks like trespassing," she said, approaching, "but maybe stalking. What are you doing here?" she asked, again, with emphasis.

"I"m going with Claire Bridges to St. Louis for a few days."

Mitzy was blank. She nodded and walked inside, leaving him and going to the kitchen. A small, table lamp burned in a corner. The room had a looming glow. Alex moved into the glow and stood waiting for her to return.

"When are you leaving?" she asked, coming back into the room, sipping water from a glass, and peering at him while she did.

"Soon," he said. "I wanted you to know."

Mitzy continued to sip, but walked to a chair and sat down. Alex acted nervous.

"Sit," she said, and he did, down into the creaking rocker.

"Does it make you upset?" asked Alex.

"Why would it do that?"

"I thought it might."

"No." Mitzy stared off. "I'm thinking of moving," she said.

"Moving? Where to?"

"Home. There's a job."

"Doing what?"

"Managing a bar."

"Bartending?" he questioned, confused and in awe. "What gives? I didn't know you could do that."

"I didn't think you needed to know," she said, with a gentle toast.

Alex raised his eyebrows in an inquisitive way. Mitzy tapped the glass.

"Besides," she continued, "you do pretty well on your own."

She took a ginger gulp and stood abruptly. Alex grinned and nodded.

"You're right," he said, easing up out the rocker. "I do do that."

Alex walked to the door, which was nothing but a screen, and pushed it open. He paused in the frame and turned around to look at her.

“If you’re not here when I get back,” he said, in a kind, gentle, gruff, “it’s been fun.”

Mitzy said nothing. She stared at him. She just stood there in the lamp light, staring as though she was looking at a ghost. Alex knew the look, and as he thought about the abuse he had placed on his body and mind, he knew she would be.

THE END